

Title: Priceless

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Summary: Kozik's chance to ride again comes sooner than expected.

Priceless **By Scribblesinink**

Tig strolled into the chapel, surprised to see he was the first. Not even Bobby, usually the most punctual, had taken his seat yet. He flopped into his chair and lit up, waiting for his brothers to gather. Should be a quick meeting. Just confirming everything was a-okay: the protection run scheduled for tomorrow, Chibs' and Mouse's trip up to Tacoma to pick up a load of guns fresh off the boat from Ireland....

Chairs scraped, boots thumped and leather creaked, until everyone was seated. Tig shifted restlessly: a couple beers with his name on them were lined up outside and he'd spotted a new sweetbutt he was looking forward to trying.

Clay lifted the gavel and—huh, that was odd: Bobby's chair was still empty. Maybe he was catching up on paperwork and had forgotten the time?

Even as Tig's brows drew together and a question started to form on his lips, the chapel door swung open again, fresh air wafting through the thickening smoke swirling under the lamps. Bobby's face was creased with displeasure and Tig's frown deepened at the sight.

Giving a slight shrug of apology in Clay's direction, Bobby took his chair, the frame groaning under his weight. "Was on the horn with Unser." He explained his reason for being late without needing to be prompted. "T-Bone got picked up for some stupid shit over in Lodi."

"Crap." Clay sat forward. "He was supposed to be one of the bodies on tomorrow's run."

Tig groaned inwardly. So much for a quick, problem-free church. "Fuckin' hangarounds."

Waving Tig to silence, Clay asked Bobby, "What's the outlook?"

"Not good." Bobby combed his fingers through his beard. "Ain't his first brush with the law. Reckon we won't be seein' him around any time soon."

"Dammit." Clay swiveled his chair, rubbing a hand across his face. "So we're a guy short."

He didn't need to add that he was talking about more than tomorrow's run. The Mayan wars had left the club with too few members, and Clay had been working hard to gradually bring the numbers back up. With the addition of Mouse, voted in last month, they were at eight full patches again. But growing their numbers took time. Not many guys made the cut—literally: it took a special kinda man to be a Son, and they always had to be careful to make sure they could trust whoever they were willing to try out. Involving a hangaround like T-Bone in the club's legit business was a way to test the man's mettle before giving him a prospect cut.

Except T-Bone had gotten his dumb ass thrown in jail instead, which left them with an immediate problem as well: too few bodies on a run was worse than nobody at all. Enough of an escort to make plain Unser's truck was loaded with something worth stealing, and not enough to stop anyone stupid enough to try. Tig wasn't gonna suggest they cancel the run, however. Unser's cash was easy money, and honestly earned. They'd simply have to find another guy to stand in for T-Bone.

"What about the new prospect?" Otto had obviously come to the same conclusion as Tig. "Gotta earn if he wants a top rocker some day."

"Boots?" Clay mulled it over. "Was gonna task him to gopher for you and Tig at the new warehouse."

Tig straightened. The location of the new safe house for the guns was as perfect as could be: a mile outside of Charming's borders, off the grid, but allowing easy access from various directions over little-traveled dirt roads. Place was totally legit, too; lawyers had seen to that. Hadn't stopped Tig and Otto from preparing a few nasty surprises for anyone snooping around; they were gonna be setting up the last of those before Mouse and Chibs got back with the shipment. They didn't necessarily need Boots, but Tig liked having the kid for doing the grunt work, and he'd be loathe to give up the help. "Kozik could do the run," he found himself saying, before he was aware he was speaking.

Several pairs of eyes swiveled in his direction. Ignoring the surprise on his brothers' faces, Tig sought Clay's gaze and plowed on. "Good guy to have around when shit goes down." The more he spoke, the more sense it made. So much so, he would have almost preferred to take Kozik to the warehouse instead

of Boots. But that would've required more trust from the club than they'd be willing to give at this point. However, taking the guy on a legit job? Perfect. It'd give Kozik a chance to ride, too. Brush up on his skills before they got as rusty as that crap piece of shit he was restoring. Added bonus: the money. Earning a little extra would allow Kozik to start paying back the cash Tig had unearthed from under the floorboards of his bedroom to buy the rusted junker in the first place.

Clay huffed out a breath. He didn't bother to hide his skepticism. "How long's he been hanging around here? Two months?"

"Three and a half." Bobby earned himself a *Dude! Who keeps track of that stuff?* look from various corners of the table. A beatific smile split his beard as he caught the looks.

Ignoring the silent play going on around him, Clay flattened his hands on the table in front of him and cocked his head, meeting Tig's gaze. "Say we wanna give your buddy the job. How's that gonna work? Man ain't even got a ride."

The comment was greeted with several snickers. Tig, like Clay, pretended not to hear them, though he was hard-pressed to keep his own mouth from forming a grin. The 'bike' Bobby had found for Kozik was one of the worst rustbuckets Tig had ever laid eyes on. In fact, if not for the Harley emblem embedded in all that crap, Tig would've barely recognized the hunk of steel as a bike. But Kozik had looked as pleased as punch and was now spending every free minute he had on the damned thing.

Tig could hardly fault him; the three weeks he'd been unable to ride after that stupid cunt had slashed open his arm during the repo job had been among the longest of his life. He unconsciously rubbed his now-healed arm where—thanks to the handiwork of the doc who'd stitched him up—only a thin scar showed what had happened. However, Kozik's lack of a bike was a point against him, and something Tig hadn't fully considered when he brought him up as a replacement.

From his place slouched at Clay's left, Piney wheezed, "Boy even know how?" Otto raised his eyebrows in Piney's direction, and the old man sniffed. "Just 'cause he's working on a bike don't mean he knows what to do with it when he's done."

Tig stared Piney full in the face. "Fuck, yeah, Koz can ride." If there was one thing he could declare with confidence, it was that. "Had himself a '65 Panhead when we were both in the Corps."

Clay whistled through his teeth. "What happened?"

"Got in some trouble." Tig shrugged. Though he reckoned Clay knew enough to

guess the full truth, he wasn't about to download all of Kozik's crap onto his brothers, and he carefully avoided looking at Happy. But Clay's question had been a fair one: every man at this table would rather cut off his ears than sell his bike. "Some shit with the VA stopping his checks or something." Hap uttered a soft grunt from where he sat further along the table, but didn't speak up to correct Tig.

"Ouch." Otto's comment was heartfelt and several pairs of boots shuffled around the table, signaling their agreement.

"Why not let him use T-Bone's ride?"

A stunned silence met Bobby's comment and for a long minute, nobody spoke. High-pitched laughter filtered through the doors from the girls waiting in the common room for the men to come out to party.

"It's—a thought." Otto, the first to speak, weighed his words carefully. When they all turned to him, he shrugged. "Hey, I happen to like the guy. He's helped out at Cara Cara a couple weekends. Building Luann's studio. Good with his hands. Doesn't complain much."

"But to let him ride another man's bike...?" Clay puffed out his cheeks unhappily.

"T-Bone's gotten his ass in the slammer. Left us in the lurch." Happy lit a fresh cigarette and flicked out the match. He didn't say anything else.

Tig glanced at Happy, who was releasing a stream of smoke from his nose, dark eyes unreadable. Tig couldn't blame his president for hesitating, but Hap's support was unexpected. Telling Kozik to ride the hangaround's bike, even on a club job, was as close to sacrilege as they could get. Tig didn't say anything, however, letting each of his brothers make up their own mind.

After another minute, Clay's gaze traveled around the table, taking a silent inventory. "Alright." Clay turned to Tig. "You talk to him. Anything goes wrong, that's on your head."

"Sure, boss." Clay's warning didn't worry Tig for a second. Maybe he didn't fully trust Kozik to stay strong around Oaktown's smack houses just yet. But on a bike on a run? Tig'd trust him with his life.

oOo

By nightfall the next day, Kozik and the rest of the guys who'd gone on the run were back at T-M. Cracking sore muscles and rolling his head, Kozik followed the others into the club house, obeying a wave from Bobby inviting him inside.

The place was packed, the air hot and noisy. As on the half a dozen other occasions he'd been inside the last few months, it never failed to call up a certain melancholy in him. The way all eyes turned toward him briefly, assessing him, the outsider; the Harley photos on the walls, along with the handful of mug shots featuring men he'd never met.... It spoke of the strong connection the Sons had to each other: the sort of bond where they might fight and argue among themselves, but when push came to shove, each and every one of them would have the others' backs. Just like in the Corps, and something Kozik hadn't had in a long time.

While Clay and Happy took up stools at the bar and ordered drinks, Bobby told Kozik to wait a sec, before heading into the club's inner sanctum, the room Kozik had yet to see the inside of. Not wanting to look like he was trying to catch a glimpse, Kozik turned his attention in the other direction. Tig was slouched on a ratty sofa, a girl in his lap. He met Kozik's gaze briefly and gave him a wink, before leaning over to whisper something in the girl's ear. She giggled, and Tig's hand slid up her leg to disappear under her skirt.

"Hey, you want this or not?" Bobby had reappeared from the chapel and was waving a white envelope under Kozik's nose. His eyes, ringed with road dust, crinkled in amusement. "Your share of the day."

"Uh, yeah. Thanks." Kozik hefted the envelope in his palm, trying to guess how much was inside without counting the bills. It should be a nice sum toward paying off the debt he owed Tig—money-wise, at least.

The day before, when Tig had stalked into the work bay Kozik had been allowed to use after hours for his personal restoration project and gruffed out, "Club needs you for something," Kozik had given him a puzzled glance. By the time Tig had explained to him what the club had decided—letting him ride T-Bone's bike on a club run—he was gaping in disbelief and covertly starting to look for a hidden camera. Even this morning, reporting in to the club house at dawn, he'd half-expected to find out he was the butt of a practical joke. But Piney had offered him a set of keys, pointed out T-Bone's bike—a slick, sky-blue Softail—and given him directions to Unser's trucking compound, where he was to meet up with the rest of the guys.

His heart had been hammering in his chest and his fingers had trembled as he'd inserted the ignition, very aware of Piney's skeptical look, and he'd been praying he hadn't forgotten how to ride. He needn't have worried; as soon as the rumble of the engine had traveled up through his spine, instinct had taken over. He hadn't made a fool of himself as he rolled from the T-M lot, not even when he'd risked a farewell wave at the Sons' VP.

The run itself—ambling along at a sedate pace behind a heavy truck to

Bakersfield—had gone off without a hitch. Which was probably a good thing. Kozik had been far too distracted with the sheer pleasure of riding to pay much attention to his surroundings. All he'd been aware of were the rumble of the machine between his legs, the cool air whipping around his face, and the wind tugging at his clothes. Even now he—.

"Ahem."

With a start, Kozik realized Bobby was still looking at him. Behind Bobby, Clay had turned on his stool and was watching them silently, beer bottle dangling from his fingers. Bobby was holding out his hand, palm up, and for a few seconds, Kozik simply stared at it. Did Bobby want the envelope—Ah!

Lifting his shoulders to his ears in a sheepish shrug, and holding back a sigh of disappointment, Kozik dug through his pockets and fished out the keys to T-Bone's bike. He dropped them into Bobby's palm. His gaze flicked toward Clay. "If you guys got another job like today, I'd be happy to help out," he offered, as close as he dared come to ask to be allowed to ride with the Sons again.

Pocketing the keys, Bobby let his grin emerge fully. Clay leaned forward. "Get that piece of crap you dragged into my lot running again, and we'll talk."

"Yessir!" Stashing the envelope inside his jacket, Kozik barely managed to keep from throwing Clay a reflexive salute before turning on his heel. His legs were still trembling from a full day in the saddle—something he was no longer used to—but he no longer felt the aches and pains of the long ride. The day still had a couple hours left in which he could get some more work in on the bike. And soon, he'd be riding for real. Not on a loaner, but on a bike he could honestly call his own.

Yeah, he'd eventually pay Tig back the money he owed him. But some of the things he had to thank Tig for were priceless.

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